The Socio-poetic Soundscape of Geraldine Monk

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Though well-educated, Geraldine Monk decided quite consciously not to let "education" smooth over or erase the texture of her Lancashire accent and local dialect. In an interview with Leonard Schwartz, she comments that

when I come over to America it's not evidently clear that I actually speak with a very broad northern English working-class accent. A lot of people think I talk Queen's English, which amuses me greatly, and it's very very nice to be away from England, people think I talk posh, which I don't. I've never got rid of my accent, because I realized that I wanted to use it. So I think in that way it's almost a political statement—that I might be educated, but I'm not going to betray where I come from and my class background.

Monk thus creates in her work a socio-poetic soundscape where place and class and gender are matters of rhyme, quantity, pitch, and pronunciation. Both the physical dimensions and the mutability of words as sound units are highly important in her poetic practice. "I do love the sound of words" she notes to Schwartz, "the way you can manipulate them, and tie them in knots—and the kind of malleability and the physicality of the word is

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Vancouver Walking won the BC Book Award for Poetry in 2006. Matter, her playful riff on Roget, came out from Bookthug in Spring 2008, and Nightmarker is just out from NeWest. Her work has appeared in The Walrus, CV2, Prism International, The Capilano Review, West Coast Line, the Windsor Review, Canadian Literature, and many other literary magazines. She is the co-founder of Nomados Literary Publishers. very important, as well as the sense of it, the connotation, the denotation of it."

Her sound ranges from the musical playfulness of a piece like "Angles" (with its fractured words, percussive finale, and references to musical terms) to daily journal pieces like the "Sky Scrapers" sequence (luxuriating in Lancashire diphthongs, speech rhythms, thick consonantal clusters, and slowed syllables) to the intense, sensuous, and political articulations of *Interregnum* and *Escafeld Hangings* that grab us by the neck and rattle our bones.

To insist on speaking in a manner labeled accented in the privileged arena of literature (traditionally open only to the wealthy classes) is immediately to establish a cultural space that acknowledges social realities, including the reality of gender-based or class-based marginalization and whitewashing by normative, schooled modes such as BBC or CBC or Oxbridge English. Monk's defiance has a precedent in the poetry of John Keats, who as part of the "Cockney School" of Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, was vilified for his low-birth accent and liberal politics.

In the whitewash of the page, Keats's accent is mostly forgotten, but Monk has taken pains to score her work so that the reader can't avoid it, as in the lines "Mary Queen of Scots banged-up in the slammer in Sheffield. // Lizzy mi Luv call off yr creepsy guards" ("Airport Security," Escafeld 27; see also recording on CD track 9). Or the following from "Katherine Hewit Replies":

> E was nowt budda Jimmy-bum-licker. E lived down't lane in a big owse wi iz porky fatted fingers drippin rings and blottin copy after nervous copy – and for what? A right royal smile? The patronising smirk of ultimate noble birth to charm iz drab and impotent circle. (Interregnum)

Interregnum and Escafeld Hangings explore compellingly the voices of condemned women—in the first case the voices of so-called witches (but actually very poor and disadvantaged people) and their associates who were hanged at Pendle Hill in 1612, and in the second case the voice of the imprisoned Mary, Queen of Scots. By extension these texts explore the condemnation of all women to second-class status; in these texts, however, women speak back to the power structure that imprisons them, just as Monk's northern English dialect challenges the southern English power structure represented by Queen Elizabeth II.

Men and women in her cotton-mill town of Blackburn, Monk recalls, actually spoke different dialects:

Generally speaking women spoke more slowly and deliberately than men because they spent their days word-miming and lip-reading in the deaf-out of the weaving sheds. It meant there were two types of Lancashire accent co-existing under the same roof: one a slow exaggerated enunciation, the other much faster and elliptical:

The**rr**e. Is. Trub. Bull. At. The. Mil*ll*.

or

Thstrouble ut' mil. (Autobiographical Note)

She places her own speech somewhere between her father's and mother's. Yet she was acutely aware that the monocultural sound coming out of the family radio was nowhere to be found in her parents' voices or, rather, they were nowhere to be found in it. Monk's soundscape is a polyvalent one, and this is reflected both in her mixing of diction and in her mixing of intonation patterns. In the poem "CS" from the "Sky Scrapers" sequence, for instance, she uses technical terms like "cirrostratus" and "transparent overcast" followed by the casual "still kinda whitish" and then the rollicking r-rolling

> haloes spiralling down to consumptive rouge with bits of seethe and brood very low keyed rage. (Selected 58)

Here she rhymes "rouge" with "brood," counterpointing it to "rage" and spacing out the words to score the slowed articulation, while creating dramatic pacing in the last two lines by choosing words that cannot be spoken quickly, syllables constructed of full vowels framed by thick consonants. Similarly, in "Hallowe'en Bikers" we hear rumbling, farting motorcycles in

> hot peppering lust through your crossed-boned

leg-spreading fundamental engines. (Interregnum 102)

Monk does not abandon meaning.

But the word "fundamental" makes this piece more than just about the "Hell's Angels"; taken with other phrases in the poem such as "ring-a-rosey / clash a holy / war," the word "fundamental" sounds the undertone of the Bush versus Islam conflict. The poem suggests complex links between jingoistic rhymes, lust, barbarian bikers, and societies driven by men "harking lord laws." So also when Monk weaves into a scornful letter from Mary Queen of Scots phrases like "tightened security at airports" and "the one over the hill is so flightless. Another is planned. Dickie Bird Airport" ("Airport Security," Escafeld 27), she invites us to consider both the relentless planning of more and more airports for global trade and the imprisonment of a powerless local community within that drive.

Basil Bunting, himself a defiantly northern English poet, thought the sound of poems was their essence, even suggesting the meaning did not particularly matter. Monk does not abandon meaning; rather, she uses rhyme, assonance, dissonance, and rhythm to counterpoint subtexts, to echo political postures, and to unravel the monocultural blandspeak of capitalism.

Works Cited

Audio tracks cited in this article are available on the compact disc accompaning the print version of this special issue. Some of the audio tracks cited in this article may also be available at www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc under the "Extras" tab.

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